Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
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FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 17th April 2016: Ameenpur. Meeting point: Punjagutta (opp. Mangatrai Pearls), 6.00AM.

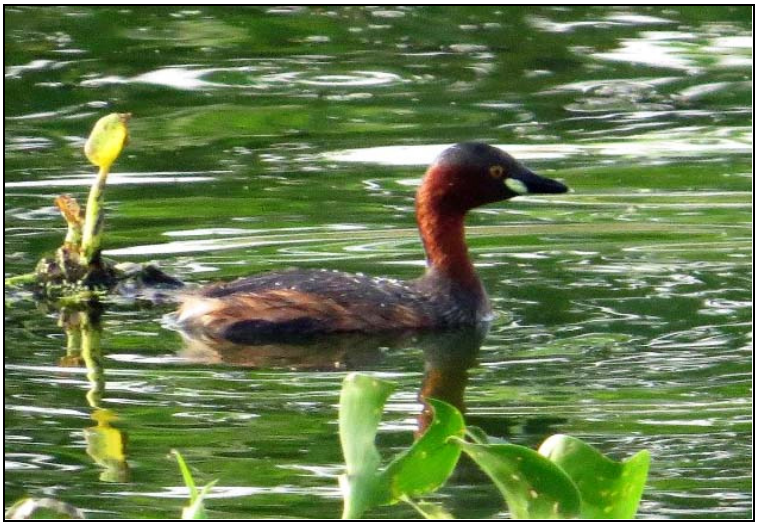
Alongside the other interesting species reported every now and then from Ameenpur are the flamingos. This would be a full-day trip. Carry water and lunch. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

INDOOR MEETING: Talk by Vivek and Shashidhar of Great Hyderabad Adventure Club.
Monday, 4th April 2016, 6.00PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500 034. (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

Among GHAC's many adventure activities are rock climbing, river rafting, hiking, etc. One such activity last year was a hike in the exotic Chikmagalur hills in Karnataka. GHAC members Vivek and Shashidhar went through the challenging experience of being lost in the jungle for 55 hours before being rescued. The duo will share their experiences, and describe how they survived for more than two days and two nights in the thick and hostile jungle.

UNPLANNED TRIPS CAN BE INTERESTING
Trip Report – Vennelagadda Lake, March 20, 2016

Text and photos: Humayun Taher



Little Grebe

The new scope had just arrived and I was pardonably anxious to test it out in the field. A few phone calls, and Lawrence suggested I should come over; we could then visit the Venellagadda Lake that lies just behind his house. The more I contemplated this idea, the better I liked it. The lake should have a smattering of waterfowl still on it and, in fact, Lawrence told me that there was a considerable amount of bird life in the area that should be interesting. So I decided that I couldn't ask for a better place to test out the scope. As it turned out, we got a lot more than we bargained for. And certainly, if an area can give us a list of 49 species in just about ninety minutes of birding, there is a lot to be said in favour of the place.

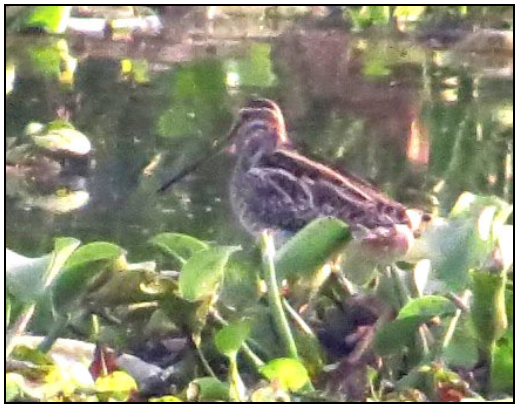
So, having reached Lawrence's house on the morning of the 20th March, the two of us started proceedings with a cup of steaming *chai* and then set off for the lake. It's only about five minutes drive from his house and, having proceeded along the bund until we reached a small flat promontory overlooking the lake, we stopped the car, got out and started the serious business of seeing what there was to be seen.

The first thing that struck me was the extraordinary amount of pollution of this little lake. The usual mess of plastic bags crammed with unsavoury rubbish, garbage littering the shores and the water giving off an unpleasant odour; I couldn't help wondering why it is that people are so unconscious of their surroundings.

There was a large dustbin set up not very far from this lake... is it too much to ask people to walk just a few additional steps and put their garbage where it is meant to be put, instead of just throwing it into the water? And then these are the same people who will moan about the stench and wonder why the government is not doing anything about it.

Garganey

But it seems that the birds like this place; or is it that they simply have nowhere else to go...? Whatever the reason, they were there in decent numbers. A large raft of ducks was on the lake. We scanned this and found that the bulk of the raft seemed to consist of the Northern Shovelers. There were over 150 of these birds in the raft, interspersed with a goodly number of Garganey, Lesser Whistling-ducks and Spot-billed Ducks.



Common Snipe

Lawrence made out the presence of a solitary Common Snipe perched in the midst of a hyacinth bed. There were distinctly few waders about, but that is not to be wondered at because, the drought notwithstanding, there was a fair amount of water at the lake and from where we are standing, it seemed to be quite deep (certainly not less than a foot of water). Add the fact that the majority of the waders would long ago have "gone north", and it is not surprising that we only had one Common Snipe and about five Wood Sandpipers in the list of migrants, while a few Black-winged Stilts and Red-wattled Lapwings represented the residents. The larger waders however, were present in some numbers.

A fairly large flock of Egrets and Pond Herons, accompanied by a few Glossy Ibis and a couple of Grey Herons were the representatives of this order. Little Grebes, Common and Purple Moorhens and Common Coots were present in fair numbers.

Glossy Ibis

I suppose that the presence of the Coots is a good indication of the degradation of the waters of this lake, but really is there any water-body these days within city limits that is free of degradation? It seemed a bit of a mixed blessing actually: If the lake had contained potable water, it would have rapidly been drained to supply the precious fluid; whereas if it is merely being used as a convenient dump-yard, the water is not only unsuitable for consumption, it rapidly becomes an odoriferous swamp that is both unsavoury and unhealthy.

Interestingly, there were a considerable number of other woodland birds around too. The promontory where we were standing had a few *prosopis* bushes around and these were attracting the Yellow-billed Babblers, Ashy Prinias, Pied and Brahminy Starlings and a large flock of Rosy Starlings.

I also spotted a solitary Greenish Warbler hopping about in the bushes very close to us. A pair of Indian Robins seemed to have a nest hidden somewhere and were loth to tell us where. A large fruiting *ficus* tree nearby gave us sightings of some Coppersmith Barbets, Red-vented Bulbuls and two Black Drongos.

We were just complaining about the lack of raptors when a splendid Black-winged Kite flapped lazily overhead and alighted on a nearby telegraph pole. We swivelled the spotting scope onto the bird and were delighted at the crisp colours and excellent clarity of the brand new optics. Clearly, this field test had been very successful indeed.

The morning was beginning to get uncomfortably hot now and it was time to retreat. So, with many a backward glance at this pleasant spot, we retired to the solace of more hot tea and back to the daily grind, refreshed by our morning spent with the feathered beings and thankful that, the pollution notwithstanding, such tiny little oases still exist in the concrete jungle of the city. How long the birds agree with us however, is open to conjecture!

Ashy Prinia

A complete list of the birds seen on this trip is given below:

Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name
1	Lesser Whistling Duck	Dendrocygna javanica	26	Spotted Dove	Streptopelia chinensis
2	Indian Spot-billed Duck	Anas poecilorhyncha	27	Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis
3	Northern Shoveler	Anas clypeata	28	Little Swift	Apus affinis
4	Garganey	Anas querquedula	29	White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis
5	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	30	Green Bee-eater	Merops orientalis
6	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	31	Coppersmith Barbet	Psilopogon haemacephalus
7	Little Cormorant	Phalacrocorax niger	32	Black Drongo	Dicrurus macrocercus
8	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	33	House Crow	Corvus splendens
9	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	34	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica
10	Eastern Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	35	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica
11	Indian Pond-Heron	Ardeola grayii	36	Red-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus cafer
12	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus	37	Greenish Warbler	Phylloscopus trochiloides
13	Black-winged Kite	Elanus caeruleus	38	Ashy Prinia	Prinia socialis
14	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	39	Yellow-billed Babbler	Turdoides affinis
15	Grey-headed Swamphen	Porphyrio poliocephalus	40	Indian Robin	Copsychus fulicatus
16	Eurasian Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	41	Pied Bushchat	Saxicola caprata
17	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	42	Rosy Starling	Pastor roseus
18	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	43	Asian Pied Starling	Gracupica contra
19	Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus	44	Brahminy Starling	Sturnia pagodarum
20	Pheasant-tailed Jacana	Hydrophasianus chirurgus	45	Purple Sunbird	Cinnyris asiaticus
21	Bronze-winged Jacana	Metopidius indicus	46	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava
22	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	47	White-browed Wagtail	Motacilla maderaspatensis
23	Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	48	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus
24	River Tern	Sterna aurantia	49	Indian Silverbill	Lonchura malabarica
25	Rock (Feral) Pigeon	Columba livia			

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Bird of the Month

Text and photo: Umesh Mani

Eurasian Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)

Eurasian Oystercatcher (Pulicat, 09-05-2015)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Haematopodidae
Genus: *Haematopus*
Species: *H. ostralegus*
Size: 40-45cm

Description & distribution: One of the largest waders in the region, the Eurasian Oystercatcher is also the most widespread of the oystercatchers, with three races distributed and/or breeding across Western and Central Europe, many parts of Asia including the Russian far-east and China, and the Indian sub-continent. Historically known as the 'sea pie', it is very easy to recognize, with a black-and-white plumage, red legs and a strong, 8-9cm-long red bill which is useful in locating earthworms and breaking open molluscs and other shellfish. The bill shape can vary, with the billtips being either broad or pointed. In flight, the bird is unmistakable; the underparts are white, while the black upperparts have white patches on wings and tail. Juvenile birds are browner, and have a white neck-collar and a duller bill.

Three subspecies are described: the nominate *H. ostralegus,* found in Europe; *H. o. longipes,* found in Central Asia and Russia: and *H. o. osculans,* found in Kamchatka (in the Russian Far East) and northern China. The main difference is in the bill length, which increases from west to east. The upperparts in *H. o. longipes* are browner, and the nasal groove extends more than halfway along the bill, whereas in *H. o. ostralegus,* the nasal groove stops short of the half-way mark. *H. o. osculans* lacks white on the shafts of the outer 2–3 primaries, and the outer webs of the outer five primaries have no white.

Habitat & behaviour: The Eurasian Oystercatcher is commonly seen in mudflats in estuaries, salt marshes, on rocky, sandy or muddy shores, and along the banks of rivers and lakes. It shows (at least local) migratory movements over most of its range. The European population, which breeds mainly in northern Europe, moves to northern Africa and southern Europe in winter. Asian populations, and those in Ireland, Great Britain and the adjacent European coasts, also exhibit local migratory movement southwards in winter. Outside the breeding season, the birds are highly gregarious, forming flocks numbering up to a hundred.

Its large numbers and well-known behavior make the Eurasian Oystercatcher an important and reliable indicator species for the health of the ecosystems where it congregates.

Its usual call is a loud, clear piping *pic-pic-pic*; it also occasionally emits a high *peep*. Its diet consists mainly of crabs; bivalves (mussels, clams), snails and other shellfish; earthworms; and other aquatic insects. Contrary to its name, it does not particularly prefer oysters (although it is one of the few wader species that are capable of opening them).

Interestingly, all oystercatchers don't adopt one standard manner of using their bills – birds with broad bill tips prise open or hammer through the shell of molluscs, whereas birds with finer bill tips tend to prefer digging up worms for food. The choice of technique may partly be due to wear-and-tear of the bill, but is more often an individual preference learnt from the parents.

Nesting: The Eurasian Oystercatcher breeds from April to July. The nest is a shallow scrape amid pebbles, on the coast or on inland gravelly islands. The usual clutch consists of 2–4 brown-spotted cream eggs. It usually produces only one brood per season, but may replace the eggs if lost.

Local name: The Eurasian Oystercatcher is known as *'darya gajpaon'* in Hindi, *'yerra kali ulanka'* in Telugu, and *'ghoga khor'* in Punjabi.

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Some observations on the changes in the Breeding Season of the Indian Courser (*Cursorius coromandelicus*) in Telangana State

Humayun Taher

The Indian Courser (*Cursorius coromandelicus*) is a species of courser found in mainland South Asia, mainly in the plains bounded by the Ganges and Indus river system. Like other coursers, it is a ground bird that can be found in small groups as they forage for insects in dry open semi-desert country. The species occurs in dry stony, scrubby or rocky country (but rarely on sandy terrain) from the Indus valley east of Bangladesh and south to the tip of Peninsular India. Other areas where they are commonly seen include the Deccan plateau and the arid regions of north-western India in Rajasthan and Gujarat. It is resident in some areas but makes local movements.

The area under discussions, where I have made detailed observations is the ICRISAT Center (17°31'05.1"N 78°16'45.2"E), at Patancheru, Hyderabad. This place has good habitat which is conducive to the Indian Courser and they are frequently observed here. As far as breeding records are concerned, my field notes show the following records:

1) 19th January 2014: Three adult birds were seen. One bird was observed crouching in a furrow in a ploughed field and the posture and behavior was suggestive of the bird either incubating eggs or shielding a chick. Another adult was standing alertly just behind this first one. We did not want to disturb the birds too much so we did not investigate this in greater detail. The birds were very nervous and as soon as the car door was opened, the crouching bird crouched down still further while the standing bird started calling in alarm. So we remained inside the vehicle and, for the 15 minutes that we stood there, the crouching bird did not get up.

Indian Courser adult crouching (Photo: Humayun Taher)

2) 1st February 2015: We saw a pair of Indian Coursers in a similar situation. However, this time the birds were accompanied by two small chicks (which did not appear to be more than a couple of days old, as they were still unsteady on their feet). Again, bearing in mind the vulnerability of the young birds, we refrained from close approach and moved away as soon as the adults started to show signs of uneasiness. Although photographs were taken by my companions, I was unable to get a photograph of the adults with the chicks. But I was very interested to note the date, which was remarkably close to the observation made in 2014.

Indian Courser chick in down
(Photo: Lawrence Mathappan)

3) 26th January 2016: I saw a pair of Indian Coursers accompanied by a young bird that did not appear to be more than about three to four weeks old. The February 2015 record of a chick in down is from *this very same field*, so to see a more grown-up juvenile in January was extremely interesting.

Indian Courser young with adult (Photo: Humayun Taher)

Apart from these records from ICRISAT, I have further records from the outskirts of Bidar town, where we had seen several juvenile, but fully fledged, Indian Coursers on 13th September 2014.

Indian Courser fully-fledged juvenile
(Photo: Humayun Taher)

Now, the breeding season of the Indian Coursers, as mentioned in the Handbook is "… overall March to August, the most favoured months varying locally; in Ceylon mainly May." (Ali & Ripley, 1989). This prompted me to go deeper into the subject; and Wikipedia had this to say: "They breed mainly from March to August. Records exist from mid-May in southern India and Sri Lanka and mid-April in Darbhanga". (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_courser). Jerdon mentions that "It breeds on a hollow in the ground, from March to May..." (Jerdon, 1864). In none of the references I have checked are the months of January/February mentioned. This raises an interesting question: whether this is normal breeding season in Southern India, or whether this constitutes a change in the breeding season dependent on extraneous conditions.

My friend Amritha Lawrence (pers. comm. vide message dated 21-4-2015) had sent me a photograph showing a pair of Indian Coursers in mating posture. This photograph was taken on 19th April 2015, at Ananthagiri Hills, around 50 km. from Hyderabad city.

Indian Courser mating pair
(Photo: Santosh Attreya)

Srikanth B (pers. comm. vide email dated 24-3-2016) had sent me a photograph showing a pair of Indian Coursers with a chick that appears to be about a week to ten days old.

Indian Courser chick with adults
(Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

This photograph was taken on 23rd April 2016, at Gandipet Lake, just on the outskirts of Hyderabad city (17°22'34.8"N 78°18'10.1"E).

When all these points are tabulated, we see something like this:

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
IN	CD	CD	MB					JU			
CP		Known Breeding Season									

IN = Probable Incubating; CD = Chick in Down; CP = Chick in Plumage; JU = Juvenile birds; MB = Mating observed

The interesting fact is that almost all my records seem to be somewhat outside the known breeding season of the species. This being the case, the following questions arise:

1) Whether the breeding season of the species is different in southern India.
2) Whether external conditions have altered the breeding season of the species.
3) Whether multiple broods are raised where habitat and food sources allow it.

Obviously, the current observations are too cursory to base any conclusions on. What is apparent is that a lot more observations are required on the species to see if the answers to any of these above questions can be at least attempted. And I would sincerely urge our members to write in to me with their observations. I would be keenly interested to see if we can build a more complete picture on the breeding season of the Indian Courser in this part of the country.

References:

1) Ali, S., & Ripley, S.D., 1989. *Compact handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. 2nd ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2) Jerdon, TC (1864). *The Birds of India. Volume 3*. George Wyman & Co., Calcutta. pp. 626–627
3) Taher, Humayun, Bindu Madhavi Racherla, Sharada Annamaraju & M Lawrence, 2015. Variations in the breeding season of the Indian Courser. *Pitta New Series* 12 (3): 5.
4) Taher, Humayun, Bindu Madhavi Racherla, Sharada Annamaraju, M Lawrence & Amritha Lawrence, 2015. Variations in the breeding season of the Indian Courser. *Pitta New Series* 12 (5): 5.

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Editors: Shanti Mani, Umesh Mani **Email:** bsap.pitta@gmail.com

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/bsap_online. **Website:** www.bsap.in. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*